SUNSET ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
1896 - 1988
A Narrative History (Revised by Jean Ketchum & Odalis Rodriguez)

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The history of Sunset Elementary School dates back to 1896 when a little one-room schoolhouse named "Coco Plum" was built at the corner of Erwin Road and Sunset Drive.

At that time the area, now known as South Miami, was inhabited by Indians, deer, panthers and wildcats. Indian hunting grounds were located in Coconut Grove and along Old Cutler Road. Along these paths early pioneers made wagon trails. They had begun to arrive by 1875.

One of the first pioneers was Adams C. Richards, a coontie starch manufacturer. Coontie was a valuable crop, often used for barter, since money was scarce.

Back then there was no school in the area, so Richards donated land from his large homestead. A.H. Ramsey, with the help of James Hobbs and John Burtashaw, built a little one-room schoolhouse. The year was 1896. There were 18 students, in grades one through eight, taught by Mr. Colyer.

Two years after the opening of the school, the five Richards children were not permitted to attend classes because of their grandfather's interracial marriage.

Around this time another important settler, Wilson A. Larkins, moved to the area. He was a self-sufficient man who brought with him a herd of cattle all the way from his home in Tennessee. He opened a dairy farm near the school, operated a general store, established and ran the town's first post office, built a telephone line and operated the switchboard. Naturally, the town came to be known as "Larkins". The school was also later named Larkins around 1904 when the Florida East Coast railroad pushed its way from Miami to Key West. The railroad station was also called Larkins. The town was then a weekly stop for loading fruit and vegetables. In fact, the oldest business in the community, dating back to 1899, was the making of guava jelly.

In 1911 the little Larkins schoolhouse became too small for the growing population. The school board refused to put a new building on a single acre of land, so a new L-shaped, two-room school was constructed at the present site on Schoolhouse Road. These wooden structures are still on our school grounds, presently housing the E.H. classes. The new structure was called "The Teacherage" because it was also built for the teachers to live in.

At the same time, a small, one-room building was constructed to house the eight to ten high school students in the area. (The original one-room schoolhouse had burned down.) This second one-room building can still be seen on our P.E. field. Mr. Larkin's daughter Mary was in the first graduating class at the school and later became a teacher there.

In 1918 a modern C.B.S. (Cement Block Structure) school was built with three classrooms downstairs and one classroom and an auditorium (complete with a ticket booth) upstairs. The school held elementary grades through high school. It had its own water system and the older boys were called from class to jump up and down to start the gasoline pump. It is likely that this was done for irrigating the crops on the school grounds.

Among their studies the girls were taught to cook and sew. The boys were taught how to raise pigs and tend gardens. Homework was done by the light of a kerosene lamp. At this time the school was still called Larkins and that name can still be seen on the front of the building, if one looks closely.

The school bus in 1920 was a Model T Ford truck which made a twenty-nine mile run twice daily to pick up students from the Larkins and Kendall areas. (Our school was then the southernmost school in the area.) The children were given blankets to keep warm in the winter and the truck's celluloid curtains were rolled down when it rained. Most of the children went barefooted and brought their lunches in tin pails to eat under the pine trees. During lunch hour and recess they jumped rope and ran races. The high school students had basketball teams which played on the rocky ground with hoops nailed to the trees.

In 1924 Mr. Branden Hayes became principal. He served until 1935 and later returned in 1945 to complete a record number of 16 years as an administrator at Sunset.

In September 1926 a hurricane (the storms were not given names until the 1950's) hit and devasted the Keys and our area. After that hurricane all school buildings had to be concrete block structures. The parents of Larkins school had banded together in 1920 to form a Parent-Teacher Association. They were busy helping families that were left homeless after the 1926 hurricane. They helped clean up after the storm and held food sales on Main Street and theatre parties at the Riviera to raise money.

The school's first small cafeteria and porch was built onto the Teacherage in 1927. The students ate their lunches on the screen-in porch. Lunches then cost only 10 cents! That same year electricity was installed.

The following year the school's name was changed to "South Miami", as was the name of the city. In 1930 the school had its own radio show on station WIOD. Prior to this in the late twenties, Bell Crutchfield's chorus students in grades six through eight, would gather on Sunday mornings to sing on "Miss Dolly's" show. At that time there were only two radio stations in South Florida.

At this time a new Victor picture machine was purchased for the school. It is likely to have been a silent film, hand-cranked model. Keeping the film running smoothly was really an art.

Mr. Sandhammer became principal in 1935 for a period of two years. During these hard times of the Great Depression, the PTA was very active in the town. They furnished free lunches, bought shoes and collected boxes of clothing for the children.

In 1937, when Mr. E. L. Cotton was principal, the first Sunset Carnival was held at night and raised a total of $110.15. At that time each teacher was provided a wooden paddle. A student caught playing hookie would soon have the little imprints of the paddle's numerous round holes on his bottom. On the bright side, good students were occasionally rewarded with a day off from school.

The December 7th attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 thrust the United States into World War II, the year that Mr. H.H. Plotts became principal. Soon after, the South Miami parents and teachers became air raid wardens, airplane spotters and Red Cross workers. "Duck and Cover" drills were practiced. Students would hide under their desks and cover their heads in preparation for a bomb attack. In January 1942 tar paper, eight buckets, sand and shovels were purchased for the office also as precautionary measures, and black out curtains were recommended for all windows.

During this time the students groaned with the installation of an oil burning steam heating system which eliminated the need for closing down the school during cold spells.

With the end of the war in 1945, following the U.S. dropping of atomic bombs in Japan, many soldiers settled in South Florida, having trained here and grown fond of our balmy climate. South Miami was growing by leaps and bounds. One year later the new cafeteria/auditorium building was completed. By 1949 announcements were easily made throughout the school with the installation of an intercommunication system.

In 1952, President Dwight D. Eisenhower was elected. South Miami School changed its name to Sunset Elementary and Mr. Rinalden Saunders became principal. A black and white television set, what was then a new form of communication technology, was installed in the cafeteria so that the students could witness President Eisenhower's inauguration.

During this time, before the present sixth grade wing and office were built, there were many wooden portable classroom buildings on the field and in the courtyard. The school became so crowded that the sixth graders had to go to the Coconut Grove School. In 1954 the sixth graders came back.

What is now the Gifted Center Big Room was a free-standing auditorium which had been erected in 1940, and was complete with a large stage, dressing room, shower, footlights and curtains. Later the stage area was turned into the present Art room and clinic and the auditorium became badly needed classrooms.

The original library was in the present Music room. Before that, teachers kept books on shelves in their own classrooms.

What is at present the teacher's mailbox room was the principal's office and the classroom next door (the German study class) was the main office.

Before school and at lunch recess, the boys and girls played out in front of the building by Sunset Drive. They would play jacks, jump rope, basketball and "Crack the Whip", a running game in which children form a line holding hands. The principal would come out and ring a handbell to start classes. Students would line up and go to their rooms.

Films were shown in the Teacherage building. Before then the custodians and their families lived in that same building. On the field there were swings, slides and see-saws. In the primary classrooms there were sandtables for indoor play. The office belonging to Mrs. Mary Alegret, the assistant principal, was then a tool shed.

In 1955 Mr. Bob Bush, our Academics Excellence instructor, came to teach sixth grade at Sunset. Among the present faculty, he has been in the school the most number of years (33). Long time former students, some of whom come during their breaks from out-of-town colleges, are likely to catch him in a chemistry experiment on their visits.

In 1957 the present sixth grade wing was built to house primary grades. The office was built then also. In these years Sunset had a school band led by Mr. Will Keeney.

During the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, drills were held and teachers took their classes into the basement area under the Art room to protect students from the possibility of a missile attack. Canned goods and water were also stored there. At its peak in this decade of the 1960's, there were 1200 students attending Sunset and Mrs. Eloise Bates was principal. Miss Flora Sampson succeeded her in 1973.

In the 1970's high land prices, mortgage rates and taxes led to a slowdown in the area's population growth. Student enrollment dropped, but many changes were soon to come about in the following years to turn around that trend. Along with growth came rapid technological progress.

By 1982 the remainder of Sunset's schoolrooms were air-conditioned. Prior to that, fans were used for cooling. Further improvements were made in 1985 when two video cassette recorders and a video camera were purchased and the first computer lab was set up with TRS-80s. In two years students have gone from storing programs on cassette tapes, to five and a quarter inch diskettes, to the new tiny three and a half inch disks.

In 1978 Dr. Roberta C. Granville, our present principal, arrived at Sunset School. That year the South Central Area Gifted Program transferred to Sunset, the first in a wave of new programs that have shaped Sunset's identity in the eighties. With four flourishing programs: E.H., Gifted, International, and regular school, Sunset in its 92nd year ~~is~~ has the proud legacy of a rich past.